

Virginia and Truckee Railroad Shops  
Between Plaza, Ann, Stewart, and  
Sophia Streets  
Carson City, Ormsby County  
Nevada

HABS NO. NEV-13-7

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## VIRGINIA AND TRUCKEE RAILROAD SHOPS

HABS No. NEV-13-7

Location: West side of Stewart Street, occupying entire "double block" bordered by Plaza, Ann, Stewart and Sophia Streets, Carson City, Nevada

Present Owner: Mr. Paul Larquier and Mrs. Omer Wolf

Present Occupant: Hodges Transportation, Inc.

Present Use: Automotive Testing Center

Statement of Significance: This large building is the most impressive visible remainder of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, one of the most famous of America's Short-Line Railroads.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Construction began in December 1872. The shops were reported to be "in full operation" by February, 1874, although they had been "inaugurated" by a gala ball on July 4, 1873.
2. Architect: none known. Contemporary sources refer to the structure as Curry's building. It is known that A. Curry (see HABS No. NEV-13-13) erected the structure, but is not known if he provided the design.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

The Virginia and Truckee Railroad Shops are built on Blocks 16 and 17 of Proctor and Van Winkle's Division of Carson City. Throughout the early 1870's the V & T acquired much property in this area of Carson City. Purchases and costs of the individual parcels are generally not differentiated in the Ormsby County, Nevada Deed Books. Eg:

1872 Deed recorded December 10, 1872, in Book 15, page 64. The V & T bought Blocks 6, 16, and 20 of Proctor and Van Winkle's Division of Carson City from P.C. Lander of San Francisco for \$100.00.

In 1950, the Interstate Commerce Commission after extended hearings, authorized the abandonment of the railroad, and in December of that year the V & T shops at Carson City were

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offered for sale. They were purchased by Paul Louis Larquier. The current owners, Mrs. Omer Wolf of Carson City and Mr. Paul Larquier of California, inherited it from their father. Deeds relating to the current ownership are found in the Ormsby County Official Records as follows:

Book 67, page 121, Deed March 31, 1955

Book 81, page 108, 109, Deed October 31, 1958.

4. Original plans, construction, etc.: The following references to the building during the course of construction come from letters written by Henry Marvin Yerington (see HABS No. NEV-13-18), General Superintendent, and later Vice President, of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad. These letters are in The Yerington Collection at The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley:

October 31, 1872. Yerington to Darius Ogden Mills, one of the three original owners of the V & T, saying that the shops should be in Carson and that the best stone was to be found at the State Prison Quarry. The letter also states that "Curry's figures were slightly less than others," indicating that work was ready to proceed and that construction bids had been opened. (The original shops, begun in 1868, were located in Virginia City).

January 1873. Yerington to Wm. Sellers, Philadelphia: "We are now putting up some pretty extensive machine shops."

January 21, 1873. Yerington to Mills: inquiring whether the shops should have iron trusses or wooden rafters in the roof structure. (Iron trusses were chosen)

April 11, 1873. Yerington to Mills: announcing that a portion of the roof (supplied by the firm of Huntington and Hopkins of Sacramento) had arrived. The letter also states that "Curry is doing his work right along."

June 25, 1873. Yerington to M.J. Booth and Co., San Francisco ordering a boiler for the shops.

July 18, 1873. Yerington to Mills: "new shops fitted up and ready to move in."

November 12, 1873. Yerington to Mills: Sellers and Co. beginning to supply machinery.

November 22, 1873. Yerington to Mills: Curry was paid in

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full, but was out \$4,000 due to a labor strike.

December 8, 1873. Yerington to Mills, announcing the shops had cost more than expected. James W. Bowker, the master mechanic of the V. & T., moved from Virginia City to Carson.

February 11, 1874. Yerington to William Sharon, one of the founders of the railroad: "shops in full operation."

Several notes on the building's construction are found in the following account of the preparations for the aforementioned July 4, 1873 ball, which was published in the July 3, 1873 issue of the Carson "Daily Appeal":

"As before noted, the apartment of the new Railway shops selected for this festive affair is that which is to be occupied by the car builders. This room is 65 feet in width by 163 feet in length. Its walls are as white as new fallen snow-made so by successive coats of white wash; and there is neither a pillar nor a post to obstruct the view from one end to the other. Some idea of the magnitude of the room itself may be gathered from the following single fact relative thereto: There are not less than 50,000 feet of lumber employed in the construction of the floor. Of course this includes foundation timbers, (which rest on solid masonry) sills and everything else. The flooring is three inch planks, firmly spiked to the timbers beneath; and Curry has had these stout planks all planed nicely, and the whole surface of the floor will be so levelled and smoothed as that the fantastic toe may never encounter the slightest obstacle to its triumphant progress."

The main shop building, with which we are concerned, housed the engine room, carpenter shop, machine shop, pattern shop, trimshop, blacksmith shop and foundry. It was constructed of sandstone from the Nevada State Prison Quarry. In addition to the main shop building there were many frame shops and appurtenances around the yards. Among these were the sand house (1875) paint house (1877) oil tank (1908), etc.

5. Alterations and Additions:

There have been few major alterations to the V. & T. shop building. The basic structure still stands much as it did when built, although its appurtenances and surroundings are quite altered. All of the tracks, which led to each of the doors on the east facade and converged at the "round table" in front, have been removed, as have all of the subsidiary

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frame shops and appurtenances which once stood in close proximity.

In September 1901, the sills, joists, and trim were repaired, and in 1916, the roof was repaired. In 1919, an equipment report of the railroad was made. At this time the Carson City shops were described as being in 85% of their original condition. This account evaluated the building in prime (new) condition as \$76,881 and gave its 1914 value at \$65,349.00.

In December 1948, the railroad, then in its final decline, made a study of the building which ended in the recommendation that a new steel machinery shop be erected to replace the older building. Among the reasons given were that the "roof trusses are in bad shape, need repairs; roof is all rotted out in spots due to age, smoke and weather action, too large for any operation of company; impossible to keep warm in winter at any reasonable cost."

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

By 1865, the initial output of the Comstock Lode had dwindled to a trickle. Virginia City experienced its first decline, and many of its inhabitants left to seek new fortunes elsewhere.

What had actually happened, and what was guessed at by a few shrewd business men, was that the major lode, the "Big Bonanza", was yet to be reached. In addition, the tailings and slag heaps surrounding Virginia City contained much low assay ore in them. This ore had heretofore been discarded because it was too expensive to cart in wagons down to the reductions mills on the Carson River, near Dayton.

Among the few men who gauged the situation correctly was William Sharon, Virginia City representative of the powerful Bank of California. He persuaded Darius Ogden Mills, President of the bank, that what was needed was a railroad to run from Virginia City down to the mills on the Carson River, taking the hitherto-fore unprofitable ore to the mills on the downgrade run, and returning with timber to shore up the tunnels of the mines as they penetrated ever deeper to the bonanza under the slopes of Mt. Davidson.

To aid in the operation, Sharon acquired for the bank, generally through foreclosure, the seven largest of the Carson River Mills. These were organized into the Union Mining and Milling Company.

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By 1868, the Nevada legislature had given a charter to the railroad, and financing had been arranged. Early in 1869, work began on grading, and by the end of the year the railroad was operational, though it did not reach Virginia City until early in 1870. The next year, 1871, a line was run to Reno, to connect with the Southern Pacific and consequently with the world beyond. Upon completion of the line from Virginia City to Carson City, the price of transporting wood was lowered from a third to a half of the cost the year before. During 1870, a two mile extension of the line was run from Carson City to reach the end of Yerington's flume, to expedite the shipping of timber to Virginia City. By 1874, when the Big Bonanza was tapped, the railroad was running 100 cars a day, taking ore down the hill and lumber back up. So great was the traffic that new rails had to be put down between Virginia City and Carson during that year.

The first shops of the V. & T. were in Virginia City, but by 1872, Superintendent Yerington was urging that the proposed new shops be located in Carson City. Construction began in December of that year, and by July 1873, work was far enough along on the building to host a "grand ball." This, the "fete champetre" of July 4, 1874 was perhaps the most momentous "event" associated with the building. The brainstorm of A. Curry, the founder of Carson City and builder of the shops (see HABS No. NEV-13-13), the ball was described "the broadest, longest, steepest and biggest-round of any ball that was ever held in Carson or anywhere else in the Great American Basin-unless it might have been a Mormon dance, in a godly way, in the Great Tabernacle at Salt Lake City...Mr. Ralston and his fellow excursionists were there to represent grand cash and broad guage (sic) capital, and the most humble and unpretentious employes of the railroad of which he is a principal owner were also there; and the while the Governor and other State officers gave dignity and tone to the affair, the sovereigns did not fail to 'shake a fut wid Fanny there'."

After its grand opening, the shops settled down to a more routine existence.

The 1878-79 Bishop's Directory of Carson City mentions that the V. & T. R.R. "has at Carson a mommoth railroad building, built of stone and iron, which embraces a machine shop, round house foundry, and car manufactory."

Darius Ogden Mills was persuaded by the railroad's general superintendent, Henry M. Yerington that a man of his position should have a private car. The Pullman Company gave a \$35,000 estimate for constructing such a car, whereupon Mills instructed Yerington to have the Carson shops rebuild one of the regular passenger

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coaches for the purpose. The shops performed the transformation for only \$2,500 and the result was good enough for Yerington himself to appropriate it for his own use when it was not being used by Mills.

It has been said that the Carson Shops of the V. & T. could "fabricate anything from a cotter pin to a mine hoist". The V & T. shops not only took care of their own, but built machinery for industries and repaired locomotives for other railroads throughout the area. On May 23, 1878, Superintendent James Crawford of the Carson City Mint arranged for the V. & T. shops to cast a new iron arch on the first of the mint's coin presses. The V. & T. proudly put one of its shop plates on the press, and charged the mint \$800.00. The job was finished on September 21, 1878. Both the press and the V. & T. identification are now on display at the Nevada State Museum, formerly the Carson City Mint (see HABS No. NEV-13-22).

The bell of the Methodist Church at Carson City was cast at the V. & T. foundry, but was found to be faulty. It would always crack in extreme changes of weather. After the sixth recasting the bell was perfected. In August 1881, the bell of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Carson City was recast in the V. & T. shops. This newsworthy happening was commented upon in the local press:

"and after the hanging  
its regular clanging  
will bid the worshippers bend the knee  
in spire of St. Peter  
'twill sound far sweeter  
than in the shops of the V. & T."

In 1890, the shops manufactured a 30 foot flagpole, topped with a ball and star, for the school at Dayton, Nevada.

The shops gradually began to curtail their work, both for the V. & T. and for others, during the early and mid-twentieth century. The outside shop profits for fiscal year 1902 were \$10,000.00. In 1936, the paint shops were closed after the death of the paint foreman. In July 1938, the foundry closed for good, and by 1943, the machine shops had retired and sold some 35% of their equipment. The cessation of activity in the shops was symptomatic of what had been happening to the V. & T. itself in the years since the "Big Bonanza."

The natural corollary of any boom is a bust, and by 1879, less than 1/5 of the tonnage of 1875 was being shipped on the V. & T. In the 1890's the railroad ceased paying dividends, a far cry

from the \$100,000 monthly profits divided between Mills, Ralston, and Sharon in 1873.

During the slack mining periods, the V. & T. made a profit on its excursion business. On March 18, 1897, the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight was held in Carson City, and the participants, as well as practically all of the dignitaries who witnessed the fight, came by way of the V. & T.

In the early 1920's increased mining activity in Virginia City once more made operations profitable, but after 1924, deficits were again reported. The pattern was not to change this time.

Ogden Mills, Jr. acquired full control of the V. & T. in 1933 and personally kept the line running until 1937, when he died. In 1938 the railroad went into receivership and in 1941 the rails to Virginia City were pulled up and sold for scrap. The profits from sale of the scrap helped keep the railroad solvent for a few years, but in 1950 the I.C.C., after extended hearings approved abandonment of the line.

#### C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: Both the Nevada State Museum in Carson City and the Nevada Historical Society in Reno have extensive photographic files on the Virginia and Truckee Railroad which include early photographs of the shops. Both volumes by Messrs. Beebe and Clegg (see bibliography below) have early photographs of the shops. Mr. Steven Drew (see bibliography below) also has an extensive photographic collection of the building.

2. Bibliography:

Beebe, Lucius, and Clegg, Charles, Steamers to The Comstock. Berkeley: Howell-North, 1957.

Beebe, Lucius, and Clegg, Charles, Virginia and Truckee, A Story of Virginia City and Comstock Times. Berkeley: Howell-North, 1963.

The Carson Daily Appeal, July 3 and 6, 1873.

Davis, Sam. P., [ed.]. The History of Nevada. Reno: The Elms Publishing Co., 1913.

Myrick, David F., Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California.



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(Vol. 1, The Northern Roads) Berkeley: Howell-North, 1962.

Thompson, Thomas H., and West, Albert A., History of Nevada  
Berkeley: Howell-North, 1958 (facsimile reprint of this  
volume, which was originally published in 1881).

3. Other sources:

The Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley has extensive material on the Virginia and Truckee Railroad and on its Superintendent, H.M. Yerington. The material has been researched by Mr. Stephen E. Drew, 4180 Randolph Avenue, Oakland, California, 94602, who generously gave of his information for the preparation of this report.

Interview November 3, 1972, with Mr. Burd Lindsay of Carson City. Mr. Lindsay worked for the V. & T. in several capacities; at one time as car builder in the shops.

Prepared by: S. Allen Chambers, Jr.  
Architectural Historian  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
December 1972

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A rare early industrial building with important historical associations, largely in its early state, of interesting architectural character.
2. Condition of fabric: Exterior stone walls are in generally good condition; roof covering is in poor condition and sagging indicates the possibility of some deterioration in the framing; exterior woodwork is considerably deteriorated.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: about 183 ft. by 312 ft.; 11 bays by 35 bays; one story; rectangular U-shape.
2. Foundations: are low, the floor being at or very near ground level, and are not differentiated from the walls.
3. Walls: Coursed rubble of roughly-squared local sandstone with

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dressed sandstone trim. (Some mortar joints need repointing but the walls appear sound throughout.) The excellent workmanship of squaring and dressing of the stones shows a variety of methods of tooling. It is probable that this work was done by prisoners at the State Penitentiary, where the stone was quarried.

- a. East Elevation: At this elevation eleven large arched openings provided access for railroad equipment into the building. Except for the interval between the first and second openings at the north end, the openings are regularly spaced and form an arcade.

Piers are coursed ashlar, crowned by plain impost blocks. The voussoirs of the arches, which are semicircular, are dressed and have projecting keystones. A few voussoirs have slipped but none of the arches appear unsound.

Each opening is closed by double wood doors. Each leaf is hung with a long strap hinge near the bottom, another below the impost, and a third one just above the impost. The upper hinge appears to permit independent operation of the top quadrant panel. These hinges are supported on heavy iron pintles embedded in the piers at joints between courses.

Each leaf has two tiers of three panels, the central one being slightly wider than the others. Above is a row of windows: two with nine lights each, with a wooden mullion between them. Very few of these openings retain either glass or muntins. Above this, in the arch, is a quadrant panel in which matched and beaded diagonal boards extend from keystone to springline.

The doors deteriorated but largely intact, except that a number of boards near the top have come loose. The iron hinges and reinforcing straps just below the keystones appear to be quite well preserved.

- b. North and south elevations: These two symmetrical elevations are similar. At the center is a large segmental arched doorway flanked by four rectangular windows; this section of the wall is terminated by pilaster strips of regular ashlar. Beyond are symmetrical sections of wall containing seven rectangular windows, terminated by pilaster strips. Next are symmetrical sections of five

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similar windows, and pilaster strips. At each end a short section of wall contains a wide window opening with a segmental arch, and a wide pilaster strip of regular ashlar, which extends around the corner with returns. All the window openings have a wide plain hoodmould and plain sill. Most of the openings are closed with boards or plywood. Where window casings are visible they appear deteriorated.

- c. West Elevation: This facade consists of two similar gabled walls, each about 66' wide, separated by an open court. Each is divided into three sections by pilasters, the central one being somewhat narrower than the other. Each contains two rectangular windows. The windows have plain hoodmoulds with those of each pair being linked by horizontal band at their lower terminus. The pilasters have simple capitals similar to, and at the same height as, the cornice of the side walls. In the gable there is a round window.

The windows of this facade retain glazed sash, which have six over six light sash.

4. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The low-pitched roof has hips at the east end and gables at the west end. It is covered with corrugated sheet metal which is rusting.
- b. Cornice: The cornice consists of two narrow courses of dressed sandstone, which corbel out successively; this also continues up the rakes of the gables. Behind the cornice of the side walls is an interior gutter, which drains through plain cylindrical water spouts located at intervals. A similar gutter extends along the east wall, with a waterspout located above each pier.
- c. Monitors, vents: Near the west front of the building is a monitor on the ridge. The roof pattern indicates that monitors may once have been on the ridge in other places.

A number of large cylindrical sheet-metal vents are on the roof, especially toward the east end. In some cases only the base of the vent remains. They are capped by double conical caps, and stayed by wires or cables with turnbuckles.

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C. Site and Surroundings:

This building occupies an entire block. Sophia Street at the north, and Ann Street, at the south, are not paved. The railway tracks which once entered from the east have been removed.

Prepared by: Harley J. McKee  
Supervisory Architect  
National Park Service  
Date of visit: August 19, 1972

PART III. Project Information

These records are part of the documentation made during the latter half of 1972 and the summer of 1973 in a project undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Nevada State Park System to record structures in Carson City and nearby areas.

The project was under the general supervision of John Poppeliers, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey. Eric R. Cronkhite, Administrator, Nevada State Park System, and Mrs. Marshall Humphreys of the Nevada Landmarks Society assisted the HABS recorders in Nevada. Professor Harley J. McKee, Supervisory Architect, National Park Service, selected the subjects and provided architectural data for the sixteen Carson City structures which were recorded. Historical documentation for these buildings was prepared by S. Allen Chambers, Jr., Architectural Historian, Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor for the 1973 Nevada Summer Team, which produced the measured drawings, was Robert L. Hartwig of Harvard University. Student assistant architects were John T. M. Creery (University of Utah), Robert P. Mizell (University of Florida), and Jack W. Schafer (University of Cincinnati). Photographs were made by Aaron A. Gallup of Sacramento, California.